

# Tips for a successful WebLearn forum

Communication and collaboration skills are critical for both work and life. Online discussion forums can be a useful way of encouraging group communication and collaboration and are particularly valuable for students who spend some of their learning time outside of Oxford.

The advantages of using a discussion forum are:

- The asynchronous nature allows participants to spend time refining their thoughts before publishing them
- The threaded conversations can be revisited at a later stage to learn more about the topic from multiple perspectives
- Learners who are not in Oxford on a full time basis can feel a sense of community by talking to other people on the same course

However, it is not always easy to run a forum successfully. As the discussion forum moderator, here are some tips to help your discussion forums run more smoothly.

## I. Get Started

1. **Ensure that participants know how to use the forums:** Student Help guide on WebLearn discussion forums (<https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/access/content/group/info/least/ForumsStudents26.pdf>)
2. **Be clear about the purpose of the discussion**  
In WebLearn, when setting up a new **forum** or a new **topic**, use the “Short Description” field (**Forum Settings** or **Topic Settings** respectively) to explain the purpose of each area.
3. **Set the ball rolling**  
Post a ‘seed’ message to encourage students to contribute to a conversation without much effort, e.g. introducing themselves (for distance learners), or to post questions or comments about a lecture or tutorial that they may have just attended.
4. **Set clear ground rules and expectations for the students and the tutors**  
Examples are to keep messages fairly short and to respond constructively to messages from other people. It is a good idea to clarify how often you generally expect to visit and respond to postings in the forum.

## II. Encourage Discussion

1. **Integrate the discussion with another activity**  
Students need motivation to participate in the discussion. For example, you can associate the discussion with course assessment activities. The WebLearn **Forums**

tool allows you to award marks to discussion postings.

2. **Set a friendly and encouraging tone in your instructions and posts**

This will motivate participants to contribute. Also encourage members of the group to respond positively to each others' posts.

3. **Participate in the discussion**

State in advance that you will be monitoring the discussion and will respond when appropriate or necessary, for example, to clarify any uncertainty about the subject matter.

4. **If someone exhibits a low level of participation, you may consider contacting him/her privately**

You may need to email the participant privately (using the **Email Sender** tool) to offer help, as she/he may be experiencing difficulties or barriers to participation, e.g. technical difficulties or a lack of understanding of the topic.

5. **It can be useful to pose questions**

Skillful questioning on your part can encourage participants to think about a topic deeply, and motivate them to respond. It is also a good idea to encourage participants to ask and answer each others' questions – this is a valuable form of peer and collaborative learning with learners taking responsibility for their own learning.

### **III. Summarise a discussion if time allows**

If you want to draw a discussion to a close or move the discussion in a different direction, it is a good idea to summarise what has been said so far. Summarising and 'weaving' the discussion threads are useful skills to acquire in facilitating online discussions (see <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/creatingsummaries.htm>).

### **Acknowledgement:**

This document is adapted from an online article by the University of Leicester:

<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/itservices/resources/cis/student-is/blackboard/staff/communication-and-collaboration/discussion-forums/tips-for-use/get-the-most-from-discussion-forums>